GENDERING THE BLACK ATLANTIC:
WOMEN'S AGENCY IN COASTAL TRADE SETTLEMENTS
IN THE GUINEA BISSAU REGION

Philip J. Havik

Introduction

Over the past decades, Afro-Atlantic ports have received increasing attention from historians and economists; the Upper Guinea Coast and Guinea Bissau are no exception to the rule. However, they have generally been studied from a purely historical angle, whereas anthropological approaches have been few and far between. The present essay traces the evolution of gendered role patterns and women's involvement in the Portuguese Afro-Atlantic trading post of Cacheu from the period of early contact in the sixteenth century to the intensification of commercial exchange and
European competition into the late 1700s. This period has been the subject of a number of historical studies undertaken by Portuguese, French, and American authors who established the town as a niche of scholarly study in the context of West Africa. Indeed, over the last forty years, the Upper Guinea Coast has become the focus of research of a growing number of Africanists. The geography of the region, which is dissected by many rivers and creeks, induced the formation of integrative trade networks that were to have a decisive impact upon its ties to Afro-Atlantic commerce. Along with these networks, a fascinating mosaic of cross-cultural interaction developed that produced hybrid communities and customs. As a result, the above-mentioned works have particularly focused on the emergence of “Luso-African,” “Eur-African,” or “Afro-Portuguese” trading communities along the Upper Guinea Coast. With a few exceptions, however, they have not specifically addressed the role of women in these interactions during the period in question.

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